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ABSTRACT

Response journals seem to be promising vehicles for inviting children's written comments because they allow children to reflect on their experiences with books and provide them with opportunities to raise questions and formulate ideas. While both teachers and researchers have indicated the benefits of written responses to books, less is known about the qualitative nature of these "private talks" about books and about the role of the adult responder. A study examined both of these issues as they concerned fourth graders in a Southwest rural school. Dialog journals were found to have a series of unique patterns that help to explain the ways in which literature was studied. These patterns demonstrated the following opportunities: (1) the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification; (2) the opportunity to think through writing and receive feedback; (3) the opportunity for students to express personal connections and to tell about what they know; (4) the opportunity to study literature; (5) the opportunity for students to explore their value systems; (6) the opportunity for extended conversations that enable children to reconsider a particular aspect of literature; and (7) the opportunity for "written conversations" to become a part of small group book talks. Conclusions support other research on the topic as they reaffirm the importance of written responses in the understanding of literature. (Contains 20 secondary references and a list of 15 children's books.) (TB)

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Having Written Conversations: Dialogues about Literature

Written

by

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> C: I feel sorry for Wilbur because he's going to lose somebody that was really nice to him. She was his best friend (except for Fern)
>
> AR: Do you think Wilbur understands what is happening? He has always been worried about himself and his well-being. I think Charlotte has taught him to care for someone else. What do you think?
>
> C: I think [s]he has taught him too!

This "written conversation" about Wilbur and his feelings for his best friend is one of many offered by a group of fourth graders as they shared E.B. White's (1952) beloved fantasy, Charlotte's Web. As children read and responded to this book and several others studied in their fourth grade classroom, they recorded their thoughts in dialogue journals. These journals allowed for written book talks and as such invited children to discuss their ideas, formulate opinions, and develop insights about authors and characters whom they adopted into their literary community.

Response journals seem to be promising vehicles for inviting children's written comments about literature (Rogers, 1987) as they allow children to reflect on their experiences with books, provide them with opportunities to raise questions and formulate ideas , as well as provide information relevant to their concerns and wonderings about literature (e.g., Atwell, 1987; Fulwiler, 1982; Mayer, Lester, & Pradl, 1983; Staton, 1988). When an adult offers a response to children's written thoughts

about literature, the journal provides an authentic audience for children's comments. This exchange of ideas becomes a "written conversation" in which children are offered support and guidance for their developing knowledge of literature.

While both teachers and researchers have indicated the benefits of written response to books, less if known about the qualitative nature of these "private talks" about books and about the role of the adult responder. We examined both of these issues while conducting a study of literature-based reading in a Southwest rural school. We focused our attention on the literary responses of fourth graders and how their understandings of literature was guided and supported by "written conversations."

Literature Studies in the Classroom

In Mrs. Hamilton fourth grade classroom, reading involved literary studies that were organized around themes such as eternal life and freedom, and/or celebrated authors such as James Howe and Jean Craighead George. These units invited connection and comparison as they included a read-aloud book studied in tandem with a literature study group novel which children read on their own. For example, during one unit Mrs. Hamilton read aloud Tuck Everlasting (Babbit, 1975) , and the children read and discussed Charlotte's Web. Both books, though in different ways, deal with the cycle of life and express the view that death is a natural part of this cycle. Other units implemented in the classroom included the following: a study of humor, mystery, and animal fantasy with the "Bunnicula" series; a study of survival stories with The Sign of the

Beaver (Speare, 1983), My Side of the Mountain (George, 1975), and On the Far Side of the Mountain (George. 1990); a focus on humor with the "Soup" books written by Robert Newton Peck; and a study of challenges and honesty with Double Dog Dare (Gilson,1988) and How to Eat Fried Worms (Rockwell,1973).

The classroom routine allowed for read aloud sessions, small group discussions, and journal writing. Initially children met in a large group setting to listen and orally respond to the designated read aloud book. Following these teacher-led discussions, children's thoughts about the book were recorded on Language Charts (Roser & Hoffman, 1992) that served as open invitations to record important thoughts and new discoveries. Children then gathered in small groups to talk about the related novel. These meetings were guided by the children's questions as they talked about issues and concerns they selected as being most important. Following these small group discussions, children were invited to record their ideas about the books in dialogue journals. These journals were open invitations to express individual thoughts and concerns as prompts were never used during this writing time.

Our initial analysis of children's journals noted familiar patterns of response including prediction, personal connections and literary criticism (Farest & Miller, 1993). Further inspection of their writing helped us discover a richness of thought and analysis that seemed to result from the quality of the literature, its non-didactic use, and this particular journal format. As we analyzed children's responses, we noted the importance of the "written conversations"; these informal literary talks established a comfortable forum through with children explored literature in individual

ways. Thus, we examined these dialogues specifically, the nature of these talks and the adults role in guiding children to further explore and consider certain aspects of the literature. In this paper, we would like to detail some of our findings, specifically those related to the patterns found in the context of the written conversations.

Written Conversations: Opportunities to Explore Literature

Our inspection of children's comments revealed several patterns in the ways in which they offered their ideas about books. While these patterns do describe the children's writing, each child did approach the journal in his/her own way and as a result, each one's voice was clearly characterized journal entries. Examples from the journals help to illustrate how children offered their ideas and insights about characters, authors, and literary themes and include the following: 1) revisiting: "Today Sam took a baby falcon and a fireman was looking around at his tree."; 2) predicting and inferring: "I think the man in the yellow suit will get Whiney and take her."; 3) personal association; "If I was Rob I would jump down from that tree and knowck [sic] Beverly B! I wouldn't let anybody mess with my girl!"4) literary association: "I recognize that name Max before. He was in Celery Stalk at Midnight."; 5) wondering: "I wonder how a dog can talk cat and a cat can talk to a dog?"; and 6) literary criticism: "If I was the author of this book, I would take some of the characters out!".

A similar inspection of the adult's written comments also revealed certain patterns in the ways in which she offered her ideas and in so doing, provided an authentic audience. This inspection yielded the following patterns of response: 1) affirming: "It seems you like you were

right about her all along." 2) requesting clarification; "Why would bears make this book more exciting?" 3) explaining: "I think the boy will keep his promise because I think he wants to stay with Sam for while. If he told, then he won't get to spend time living in the wilderness." 4) wondering: "I wonder why the Zuckermans didn't charge people to see Wilbur." 5) personally connecting: "When I was younger I played football with my cousins. But I wouldn't want to play with Janice."; 6) critiquing:"The author does seem to give us clues about what is going to happen."; and 7) inviting children to go beyond: " How do you think the book would have been different if Matt and Attean hadn't become friends."

While these patterns of response certainly describe how children and the adult responded, we noted that the richness of thought and analysis was within the dialogue itself. As we closely examined the actual dialogue, we noted that these written conversations were also characterized by a unique set of patterns that helped to explain the ways in which literature was studied. Again, examples from the journals help to illustrate a richness of thought and the developing understanding of literature.

1. **Opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification**. Children often used their response journals as a means to find answers to personal questions and to better understand the story. At times, children posed questions to simply invite comment from the responder such as "Why have you read all the books we read?" Other times, they asked for further information about a character, an event, or in this case a specific detail in the story. The adult response provided the clarification and thus helped children to better understand:

C: What do you think will happen in the 2nd chapter? I think that they are at Chateau Bow-Wow, and they don't want to go. I think that Harold really want to go there. Do you? Why do you think they called it "Howliday Inn?"

AR: I think they call it "Howliday Inn" because it's a play on words. There is a Holiday Inn and since this one is for pets, it's called Howl-iday Inn." Is that what you think?

2. **Opportunity to think through writing and receive feedback**.

In offering their thoughts about the various books, children wondered about the story and thoughtfully considered certain aspects of the text. At times, they simply wondered about what they were reading such as "I wonder if he [Wilbur] sneezes when he oinks?" and "I wonder if the mother and father falcon will ever know if she [Frightful] is gone?" Embedded within their wonderings were invitations to the responder, invitations that seemed to asked for her support and/or her opinion. While reading Charlotte's Web, one child seemed to be questioning Fern's choice of activities and asked the responder for a personal thought: "Why do you think that Fern likes to go and watch Wilbur play in the manure pile? Do you think that would be fun?" Chester's triumphant return in Howliday Inn (Howe, 1982) invited another child to express her reactions as well as ask for the responder's personal thoughts: "Are you glad that Chester's back? Were you scared for a minute? I was! Harold was, I know!"

Children often used wondering-type questions to "think through writing." These response were characterized by beginning questions that children then answered. These personal "question and answer"

exchanges seemed to allow for the presentation of new ideas and/or personal interpretations: "Did you know that Harold really admires Chester but he just doesn't want him to know he does! Well, at least, that's what I think!.

At times, children seemed to "present a case" for a thought or opinion that indicated a new way of thinking. They knew that this expression of a new idea would be read and responded to in a way that would offer them affirmation, and when appropriate, a further consideration such as in the following talk about the relationship between two unlikely friends:

> C: Do you think C.S. (Charlotte Spider) deserves credit for working in her web? Maybe she goes to all that trouble just because Wilbur is her friend? Don't you think that's nice. I mean I've never seen anybody that has really made friends with a pig, have you? Have your cats ever been nice to a mouse? See? That's kind of strange...
>
> AR: I guess their friendship is pretty unusual. I wonder why E.B. While chose to have a spider and a pig become friends?

3. **Opportunity to express personal connections and tell about what they know**. In offering their ideas, children often viewed the book through their personal experiences and as a result, noted the connections between the story and their own lives. Often beginning with,"If I was ....," children would place themselves into the story , and suggest what they would do in a similar situation. After reading about Sam's decision to let Frightful have her freedom, one child offered his view as well as his personal feelings about animal companions: "If I were Sam, I

would wistle [sic] for Frightful so I could pet her and say goodbye." At times, connections with characters were enriched with personal stories that helped to explain a particular suggestion such as the following tale offered in response to How to Eat Fried Worms:

> If I was Billy I wouldn't eat the fried worms. And if I did I would put them on ice cream and eat (them) with ice cream. Once my cousin and my brother said they were going to beat me up if I didn't eat a rolly-polly. I stuck one in some crackers and dropped it out when they weren't looking at the crackers. Has anybody done that to you?"

At times, these connections involved expressions of personal knowledge and therefore invited a conversation that indicated involvement and personal interest such as in this discussion about fishing hooks:

> C: In both books they cut notches in sticks. Sam has a good idea for making a fish hook!! But it probably would be better for him to do something like this: around the bottom and then over the top like this and then stick it through a hole. I am going to try this way in one book at my house. I am going to finish it at my house. I think it will be great.
>
> AR: I like you idea for making a hook. Did you try making one at home. Did it work? I like the way Jean Craighead George puts the drawings in her book. The drawings help you better understand what Sam is doing. I wonder how she learned so much about surviving in the woods!
>
> C: I made a hook. I made it at home. It kind of worked. Maybe she gets the information from her sons.

4. **A forum for the study of literature**. These written conversations were often a forum for the study of literature. In offering their responses, children examined, analyzed, and/or judged the author,

characters, plot, and theme. They noted character traits, accurately describing Charlotte as "clever, loyal, and caring" and suggesting Chester, James Howe's literate cat, was not quite the expert he pretended to be: "Do you think that Chester really knows all that stuff about werewolves or he's just making it up? I think he's just making it up because he doesn't know that much about some things." Their analysis of the story invited critical thinking and interpretation such as "Do you think that goose really mean that the egg didn't hatch? Why? I do because if it did Avery would have taken Charlotte."

The conversations that ensued from these comments became literary talks in which the responder built upon children's literary knowledge and invited them to consider certain aspects of the literature. The reading of Charlotte's Web allowed for personal talks about the author as the responder invited children to consider the author's role as is illustrated in the following examples of her responses: "I wonder why E.B. White decided to have the characters go to the fair?" and "Why do you think E.B. White decided to have a character like Templeton in his book?" These comments were offered to model new ways of thinking about the story and therefore, extend children's understanding of literary criticism such as in the following conversation about how authors tell their stories:

> C: This chapter or pages was good because it tells stuff like his is going to build his tree house. (House out of a tree.) And it also tells little details. Do you like it when books tell details like small details? Or do you just wish they would get on with the story? I like it when the author tells the small details.
>
> AR: I think it's important to know the details sometimes. I think good authors know when to give you details and when not to give you details. I wonder how they know?

5. **Opportunities to explore their value system**. These conversations allowed children to explore and confirm their views on justice, the treatment of animals, and fairness. In this forum, children seemed comfortable in expressing their thoughts about issues such as offensive language, freedom, and right vs. wrong. While reading On the Far Side of the Mountain, many of the children considered both sides of the issue concerning the captivity of wild animals. They compared and discussed Frightful's life with Sam and her harsh treatment at the hands of poachers. In the end, many expressed their anger about Frightful being used as sport and decided that her eventual fate was fair as they determined that "Sam did the right thing to give Frightful her freedom." In offering her ideas, the adult responded never questioned the child's thoughts, but rather stated her own values and at times, invited a child to consider the issue in a different way such as in this response:

> I don't know if I would want to train a wild animals. I guess I think wild animals should be left alone. I don't even like to go to the circus because I don't like to see the animal trainers use whips. I think I believe in spoiling animals not training them.

Charlotte's Web also seemed to invite discussions of the treatment of animals as well as issues of fairness as is illustrated in the following conversation:

> C: If I were the Zuckermans I would charge a fee and donate it all to the fair but lie and keep half of it and buy a Zamborgini or a Ferrari or a F-1 stealth Bomber. I wish I were the Zuckermans. I could find a bunch of ways to make money.
>
> AR: I think if I had a special animal I would keep it a secret. I would treat the animal very special and be happy that the animal was mine. I wouldn't want to make money.

6. **Opportunities for extended conversations that enable children to reconsider a particular aspect of literature.** These written conversations offered children opportunities to revisit and further consider personal concerns raised while reading a particular book. At times, children offered multiple examinations of a certain character and/or particular aspect of the story, and as they did so, seemed to fully explore their personal thoughts. For example, one children recorded her ideas about one character in 10 of her 16 journal entries. These multiple entries became an extended conversation, one in which issues were revisited, reexamined, and at times, resolved to the child's satisfaction.

Several of these "extended talks occurred during the reading of Charlotte's Web. Charlotte's ultimate sacrifice seemed to invite children's ideas about death and the loss of a friend. One child wrote about her feelings and understandings in several journal entries. This extended conversation seemed to provide the child a chance to fully express her ideas about Charlotte's death as well as the support and guidance that may have helped her rationalize it all in a way she could understand:

> C: I feel sorry for Charlotte. But Wilbur should learn that everyone has to die sometime or another. Everybody dies once in a while. Charlotte shouldn't be so hard on herself when she's going through this! It is kind of like when Mother Lambs are having their babies they may not make it but at least a new living baby lamb comes into the world.
>
> AR: I think we all know that sometimes people and animals have to die. But, when that person or animal is someone you love, it is very sad. Charlotte seemed to give of herself a lot. She saved Wilbur and she gave her life for her babies!
>
> C: This book is good but I feel sad for Wilbur because he's losing his one and only friend (besides Fern). Do you think Charlotte is really sad now? Do you think Charlotte is

going where people go? I don't because animals don't go to Heaven!

AR: Well, I kind of think animals may have their own heaven.

C: .. Charlotte was a good friend. Why do you think E.B. White (in his book) made her die in his book? I can't think of much to say!

AR: I think E.B. White was telling us his ideas about life and friendship. In some ways, E.B. White was describing what Miles explained to Winnie out on the lake. That is that life has a cycle --of a beginning, a middle, and an end-- and that that cycle is what life is all about. What do you think?

7. **Opportunities for "written conversations" to become a part of small group book talks**. Although children preferred to keep these private talk just that -- private -- topics and issues discussed in the written conversations often became a part of the classroom discussion. Issues first raised in journal writing, often enriched the small group meeting and at times seemed to provide a direction for the discussion. Information and opinions shared in the journals often found their way into classroom discussions and later were explored by other children in their journals. For example, opinions about Chester's apparent disappearance in Howliday Inn were first noted in one child's journal entries. The conversation that followed was an exchange about ideas about the logical reasons, or perhaps, illogical explanations of his disappearance. The child then shared these new ideas with his classmates within the small group meeting. Later, these same opinions, first shared by the adult responder in a written conversations, were noted in other children's journals.

This connection between the journals and class discussion was especially noticed while children were reading The Sign of the Beaver and My Side of the

Mountain. In response to one child's observations about the links between these two books, the adult responder suggested another possible connection:

> C: Do you think Sign of the Beaver and My Side of the Mountain are very much the same? I do because neither one of them have protection and they both put matches on stick to keep time and they both have trouble keeping a fire going. Do you think their both very different? I do because one person lives in a cabin and the other lives in a tree and one know survival skills.
>
> AR: I'm glad you;re thinking about both books. And you're right about the thinks they have in common. You know what else I noticed -- both books are written by women. I guess some people might not think women would know about survival. But these authors do!

The child then brought this new considerations to his small group discussion and talked about the possibilities with several of his classmates. Later, we found a similar through in another child's journal, a thought first originated in the written conversation:

> C: Why do you think two women wanted to write survival books? Because how would anybody know this much about the wilderness if they didn't go out to the wilderness or practically live there. If they didn't do that, they must have studied before writing the book. What do you think of two women writing wilderness stories?
>
> AR: I find it very interesting that both books were written by women. I have a tape of J.C. George. Maybe she will tell us how she came to know so much about surviving in the woods. I think both authors must have spent a lot of time in the library researching their ideas. What do you think?

Dialogue Journals: The Role of 'Conversation'

Our analysis confirmed our initial inspection, that is, that the dialogue provided the forum for literary development and that adult responder's role in the conversations

is a crucial one. These private talks about books were rich and enriching as children confirmed, considered, explored, clarified, and expanded their thoughts about literature. Through her comments, the adult responder created and maintained a "conversation between equals" and at the same time, invited children to consider and develop new ways of thinking about books.

Our work in this classroom has supported the work of others who have reported the many benefits of using journals as a means to invite literary response (e.g., Five, 1986; Hancock, 1992; Kelly, 1990: Wollman-Bonilla, 1989). The written conversations held within the pages of these dialogue journals reaffirmed the importance of written response as well as the importance of adult guidance and support. These private talks about books allowed children a secure and at the same time, challenging forum for the study of literature. Just as studies of "storytalk" have helped us develop insights into what constitutes "grand conversations" (Eeds & Wells, 1989), studies of written conversations can help us better understand the opportunities offered through written response to literature. Yet, we must be careful to ensure that written conversations about book are indeed "conversations" and not just another type of a worksheet designed to assess children's understanding of a book. If indeed, literature is a fragile medium that we wish to protect (Babbit, 1990), and if we wish children to become life long readers, then we must ensure written response is a vehicle for personal expression and exploration, and as such a meaningful journey into the world of literature.

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